

## The Collaborative Engagement of Preservice Special Education Teachers and Social Workers

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## Abstract

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and related accrediting agencies (e.g., The Council for Exceptional Children) dictate the training of preservice teachers. Likewise, the accrediting agencies in the field of social work (e.g., The Council for Social Work Education) specify the content for aspirant school social workers, including disabilities studies. At present time, the academy typically educates preservice students in these two disciplines in separation. That is, preservice special education teachers and preservice school social workers rarely, if at all, interact. This “silo” division is unacceptable given the reality that once employed in the field, students from both of these disciplines will need to collaboratively interact on behalf of youth with disabilities. The purpose of this interactive presentation was to engage participants in a semi-structured conversation about how to purposefully overlap components of preservice special education teaching and school social work training. The intent was to provide collaborative exercises at the preservice level that mirror the necessary collaborations that should occur at the inservice level when addressing the needs of youth with disabilities.

## Overview

School social workers (SSWs) are trained to provide emotional and instrumental support for families, encourage family-to-family support, and recognize the cultural diversity and uniqueness of each family within the service delivery system (Hutchins & McPherson, 1991). Lim and Adelman (1997) proposed the establishment of school-based collaborative teams with SSWs as organizational facilitators, a viable model for resource coordination. The SSWs' specific role would be to educate special education and general education teachers about systemic challenges youth with disabilities and their families encounter (Briar-Lawson, Lawson, Collier, & Joseph, 1997). In turn, teachers could enact school-based interventions and account for issues beyond the confines of the classroom. For example, Lynn, McKay, and Atkins (2003) suggested SSWs could emphasize home visits and dialogue with parents about how to carry over and modify school action plans for home use.

Researchers have identified SSWs as essential support personnel in the inclusive special education movement. Pryor, Kent, McGunn, and LeRoy (1996) stated: "Social workers can promote inclusion by helping students accept human differences and working with the school to move from acceptance to celebration of those differences." Mills (2003) discussed the necessity of SSWs' advocacy on behalf of African-American males, a population disproportionately represented in special education programs.

Lewis (1998) stated: "School social work practice should be conceptualized more broadly than services provided by employees of the public education sector" (p. 188). The author's assertion is credible when SSW services on behalf of youth with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBDs) are considered. The literature confirmed that expansive SSW collaborations with agencies and service providers outside of school settings have occurred for this disability population (Lewis, 1998; Lopez, Torres, & Norwood, 1998). For example, Altshuler's (2003) case study about students living in foster care concluded that SSWs were in unique positions to provide a bridge between foster care agencies and schools: "They can speak the same language as caseworkers and they know the education language that permeates school systems" (p. 61). At the same time, however, the literature has also exposed barriers that have impeded SSWs' provision of integrated services. Reported challenges have included: (a) distrust between SSWs and teachers (Altshuler, 2003), (b) lack of

adequate time and resources to design and implement services, (c) school administrators' demands of SSWs (Mills, 2003), and (d) devaluation of SSWs' participation in collaborations (Tower, 2000).

A dearth of information about restitutions for these barriers further perpetuates collaborative discords between SSWs and teachers. Altshuler (2003) explained: "[School social work] research has failed to identify the collaborative barriers and successful practices that professionals in public education have experienced" (p. 53). The following table provides examples of how professors of special education and school social work could collaborate and provide team-taught activities for students from their respective disciplines.

## Beyond the Silos: Engaging Preservice School Social Work and Special Education Majors in Collaborative-Advocacy Activities

**Key:**

**SPED student = preservice special education student**

**SSW student = preservice school social work student**

**Class Period = 1.5 hours**

Topic	Duration	Objectives for Preservice Social Work Students in the Activity	Objectives for Preservice Special Education Students in the Activity	Sample Activity Description
<i>Family empowerment</i>	1 class period	Articulate the importance of system (community, school) resources in addressing SPED concerns	Engage the family in addressing the learning needs of students with disabilities	SSW and SPED students participate in role-play involving family, SSW, and SPED teacher; repeat, switching roles; mutual dialogue and debriefing session afterwards to affirm benefit of each professional's contributions
<i>Foster care students accessing SPED services</i>	3 class periods	Recognize and address system barriers that foster care students experience in meeting educational outcomes; learn IDEA parameters related to SPED	Understand how court plans for foster care youth complement and contradict educational plans for students with disabilities	SSW/SPED student pairs interview school personnel about the challenges of meeting educational needs of foster care youth per IDEA; report findings to classes
<i>Homelessness</i>	1 class period	Articulate why the McKinney-Vento Act is not an all-inclusive primer to address the educational needs of homeless students with disabilities	Understand the systemic issues above and beyond education/McKinney-Vento that affect homeless families	SSW/SPED student groups write case studies that feature ethical and logistical dilemmas related to McKinney-Vento Act; groups read and respond to each other's cases
<i>Diversity/social justice issues</i>	1 class period	Articulate the forces in society and schools that explain and perpetuate racism	Identify possible school-based biases that explain overrepresentation of African American males in SPED	Joint class discussion: How can a macro understanding of racism help us understand and inform our efforts to address the educational needs of African American males in the classroom?
<i>Practicum/internship</i>	2 class periods	State the challenges, needs, and barriers that SPED teachers face in the field	State the challenges, needs, and barriers that SSWs face in the field	SPED students shadow school social workers for a day and report their reflections; SSW students do the same for SPED teachers.
<i>Interpersonal/Interviewing skills</i>	1 class period	Recognize the importance of interpersonally engaging corollary systems (teachers, principals, coaches, etc.) in order to enhance assessments of students with disabilities	Practice skills involved in leading SPED conferences (e.g., IEPs) that engage input from colleagues	SSW/SPED students role-play an IEP meeting in the classroom; observers identify how collaborative mutual engagement brings breadth and depth to the IEP process
<i>Evidence-based research and practice</i>	1 semester	Understand how SSW evidence-based practice (EBP) complements and contradicts school-based EBP	Understand how school-based EBP complements and contradicts SSW EBP	Student teams from both disciplines propose, develop, carry out, and present EBP interventions for SPED services; mount on posters and display as part of research fair
<i>Curriculum adaptation and modification</i>	3 class periods	Research the primary environmental stressors that impact the outcomes and psychosocial development of students with disabilities	Raise awareness about characteristics of disabilities that should be accounted for when adapting and modifying curriculum	SPED students adapt curriculum for a student; SSW students address the environmental forces and stressors that impact the student; SPED students then discuss how they would revise their original plans based on SSW student input
<i>Disability policy</i>	1 class period	Identify unresolved issues that NCLB incurs for students with disabilities	Explain how the SW profession's emphasis on psychosocial and emotional risk factors might address unresolved issues related to NCLB	Invite panel of various SPED and SSW professionals to discuss their approaches to NCLB; student small groups articulate the challenges and opportunities in President Obama's forthcoming changes to educational policy

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